

# Call waiting

*Telephone interpreting services are booming. But how do they actually work? Sue Quelch, who works for one of the technology providers, explains*



Sue Quelch is the director of communications at MITON Systems Ltd.

Telephone interpreting services originated in the early 1970s, but it's only in this century that they have really picked up in popularity. Today they are being increasingly used especially in the public sector – not least because they are often seen as a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face interpreting services.

However, this boom has tested the limits of the existing processes. Innovation in this field has been slow, partly because providers that specialise in face-to-face interpreting have often been working with local interpreters, matching them to local businesses. Their office systems have often been quite low-tech too. Usually a request would be handled by someone in the office and

forwarded individually to an agency. This is obviously both labour-intensive and limited to office hours.

## Taking a platform online

Online platforms are different. They mean that calls are automatic, are taken 24 hours a day and don't need internal administration.

*The screens and the system are really easy to use, but they are backed up by very sophisticated hidden technology*

The technology involved isn't the kind that you would install and maintain in your own office or your home. It connects all telephone calls to highly intelligent computer and data-processing systems. In the case of the set-up provided by the company I work for, the screens and the system are really easy to use, but they are backed up by very sophisticated hidden technology. As a result, language service providers (LSPs) are able to expand their existing telephone services, or add new ones if they only provided face-to-face interpreting before.

## Setting a platform up

The platform is based in the cloud, which means all the screens or interfaces that the LSP uses to monitor and/or control its interpreting are accessible via a web browser.

The LSP starts by supplying a spreadsheet with a list of its clients and interpreters, which is imported into the platform. On the platform we use, it takes around a week to set up the 'branded environment'; that is, to set up the area on our platform which the LSP will use, complete with their logo and all their client and interpreter information.

Once it's all set up, the LSP logs into the platform via a web browser, which takes them to their branded environment, where they manage all of their clients and interpreters and can also access the screens with information about billing and statistics. They can also operate the 'operator control screen' if they wish; it's a useful way to get to know the system, but it's not essential.

## The day-to-day workings

Interpreters register their availability for work and then when a call comes in they can accept or reject it. They can use either a landline or a mobile, although some LSPs may have issues with the confidentiality and/or reliability of a mobile connection.

Clients dial in from a landline or mobile, enter a code that identifies them, and then another code for the language in need of interpreting. The system can either check for an available interpreter, and then connect to one, or it can be set to identify the client and automatically call and connect them to an interpreter for their usual language.

## Setting up a system

### The InterpreterLine experience

MITON is a technical company that provides systems that connect telephones to intelligent computers. We were approached by an expert in the telephone translation field and were asked to build a platform. At that time, most platforms used technology which had already become quite outdated so there was a lot of potential for improvement.

The first iteration turned out to be too complex to be easily usable. It had too many unnecessary features and was tailored too precisely to specific purposes. After that we involved a real customer, who told us exactly how they wanted a system to work. That was five years ago, and since then, we have worked with

and consulted a lot more customers about what they require and how they'd like to see this incorporated into a platform.

Over the years, as more and more people started using it, we've adjusted the features and the flexibility to accommodate most of the things that a telephone interpreting service needs. Not all LSPs use all the features, but when they do need something, we may well already have been told that we need to build it in and be working on it. For instance, a recent customer raised the issue of jobs that need extra degrees of security, and for which the system should only be able to use landlines.

The other thing we had to think about was that if we wanted

to build a platform LSPs could rely on and make central to their work, we needed to minimise any likelihood of the system or systems crashing. That meant building in 'multiple redundancies', or systems that mirror each other; so we have a main system and a backup system that are exactly the same. They operate next to each other, and any data changes on the main system are immediately replicated on the backup system. So if the main system has a problem, we can switch over immediately to the backup system without losing any client data. They're also hosted at a very secure location – and they even have battery-powered backup available in case there is a full power failure.

If they prefer, they can be connected to an operator instead – and this can be done automatically too.

Once an interpreter is connected, the client can dial a third party and add them to the call with the interpreter, to create a conference of three or more people – there are no limits to the total number of people that can be added. If they wish, they can press a key to connect to an operator at any point. If no interpreter is available, the system can redirect to an operator or alternatively to a backup agency.

Clients can do this at any time of day. They also have the option of a mobile app, which they download from the platform. This means they can then make calls and select their preferred interpreter without needing to enter a PIN code.

### The LSP perspective


The platform has a built-in reporting facility that allows the LSP to download the statistics from the calls

*Once an interpreter is connected, the client can dial a third party and add them to the call with the interpreter, to create a conference*

they put through the platform and to see how efficiently they are being handled. For example, they can download the details of how many calls a client has made, which languages they requested, how quickly the call was answered by an interpreter, which interpreter answered the calls and how long the calls lasted. (This also means they know how much to charge the customer to the second – depending on other variables, including the rate for that specific language.) They can also download reports on how often

an interpreter is available to accept calls, how many calls they took and for how long, and how much they should be invoicing for.

In fact, all the LSP needs to do is download a monthly spreadsheet that details the monthly transactions in any format. If they allocate a code to each client on the accounting system, they can then add this code to the client's details on the platform, so it's easy to match them up when they are due to issue invoices.

The whole system means that if an LSP wants to expand, all it needs to do is add a client and/or add interpreters from different languages. None of the calls go through the LSP's own office telephone system, so there's no particular limit. It's a technological expansion that looks extremely simple, but is in fact quite complicated. However, the whole point is that users do not need to understand the technological minutiae. Instead, they can focus on the business of interpreting. 

## Advancing Your Freelance Translation Career



Our acclaimed Advancing your Freelance Translation Career online course is aimed at translators who have been freelancing for some time and now want to focus on finding premium work with high-quality agencies and direct clients.

You will uncover ways to accelerate your career and win new business.

### What you will learn

- How to identify your strengths and key points of difference to give you a competitive advantage

- Effective ways to define your ideal client base to guarantee high-quality work
- Successful sales techniques that get results
- New ways to build and maintain customer relationships and ensure repeat business
- Effective ways to pitch yourself to an actual client and win the business

### How you will learn

Four live webinars with practical activities, followed by four online discussion sessions and one client session.

You are guaranteed a candid approach from Judy Jenner, Tess Whitty, Doug Lawrence and Sara Freitas, that will help you rediscover what is important in your career and provide the insight required to accelerate your career to the next level.

### Don't just take our word for it

*"I've been putting a lot more effort into contacting agencies, usually based on colleagues' referrals, and getting them on board as clients. I might say I've been empowered to change my perspective from that of a freelance translator perpetually waiting for her next project to that of an entrepreneur translator, shaping her own future." Camelia Geary*

The course costs £299 for ITI members and £399 for non-members.

For full details visit <https://bit.ly/2CvXQA6> or contact Ann Brooks on [professionaldevelopment@iti.org.uk](mailto:professionaldevelopment@iti.org.uk)

